Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture
Ethan Knapp, Series Editor
Inventing Womanhood

Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing

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Thanks to my brother, Ryan, and my parents, Rod and Billie Williams; they always believed I could write a book and celebrated every step along the way. Hugo lived with this project for many years and I simply could not have written it without his interest, support, and understanding.
In those days a rumour arose and great excitement amongst the people because, when tournaments were held, at almost every place a troop of ladies would appear, as though they were a company of players, dressed in men’s clothes of striking richness and variety, to the number of forty or sometimes fifty such damsels, all very eye-catching and beautiful, though hardly of the kingdom’s better sort. They were dressed in parti-coloured tunics, of one colour on one side and a different one on the other, with short hoods, and liripipes wound about their heads like strings, with belts of gold and silver clasped about them, and even with the kind of knives commonly called daggers slung low across their bellies, in pouches. And thus they paraded themselves at tournaments on fine chargers and other well-arrayed horses, and consumed and spent their substance, and wantonly and with disgraceful lubricity displayed their bodies, as the rumour ran.

And thus, neither fearing God nor abashed by the voice of popular outrage, they slipped the traces of matrimonial restraint. . . . But God in this as in all things had a marvellous remedy to dispel their wantonness, for at the times and places appointed for those vanities He visited cloudbursts, and thunder and flashing lightning, and tempests of astonishing violence upon them.¹

The most unsettling aspect of these women seems to be that they have “slipped the
traces of matrimonial restraint [laxato matrimonialis pudicie freno].” Because their marital situations are unknown, they cannot be classified as maidens, wives, or widows—the traditional triad of female roles. Those roles take on meaning most fully in a familial context and in relation to men, but Knighton’s women appear outside of that framework and so must be dealt with on their own terms. He struggles to do so by likening them to “players [interludii],” suggesting that they are lower class, and, most extensively, by relating them to recognizable masculine models or characteristics. If Knighton cannot connect these women to their fathers or husbands, in other words, he can underscore a different set of connections to maleness: the women’s manifestation as a mounted “troop [cohors]” armed with daggers and wearing “men’s clothing [apparatu uirili].” However, tension exists between these aspects and the feminine elements of the women’s appearance and behavior; these “ladies [dominarum]” remain unambiguously female, neither actors nor men. Rather than condemning this spectacle with the “popular outrage [populi uocem]” that Knighton projects, people react with fascination and “great excitement [ingens clamor].” The new vision of femininity that the women embody intrigues and disturbs Knighton as well as the tournament audiences, partly because the women are never clearly classified (using the available terms and categories) or controlled.

This is the second issue the passage raises: in “slipp[ing] the traces of matrimonial restraint,” the women also evade the largely subordinate relationship to masculine authority inherent in maidenhood, wifehood, and—albeit to a lesser extent—widowhood, and therefore raise questions about whether and how women might exercise power in other ways. These questions carry a spiritual undertone, since the Church helped both to limit women’s authority as wives and to expand it as virgins or visionaries (most often in the mode of the Virgin Mary, who derived authority from her position as Christ’s mother and intercessor for humanity). However, in addition to commanding the attention of the spectators and the chronicler himself, the women seem to possess wealth and independent agency; they even appear prepared to defend themselves with daggers. Their power does not conform to any sanctioned model, secular or spiritual, and instead—in Knighton’s portrayal—signifies a lack of respect for God and places the women in direct conflict with him. To resolve the thorny issue of female power, then, the passage turns to deus ex machina. But God’s attempts to punish or contain the women are apparently ineffective; because multiple “tempests [tempestatum]” occur, the implication is that these women continue to appear at tournaments and continue to feed the rumor for some time.

If these women have escaped the restraints of matrimony, however, Knighton has not: he strains to understand and describe these women who exceed conventional feminine identities based on marital status but he lacks both precedent and vocabulary. Although Knighton is writing in Latin, the same problem exists in Middle English and, as I will argue below, became more urgent due to a number
of cultural changes. In response, from the late fourteenth through the fifteenth century, Middle English writers experimented with new ways of imagining and representing women's lives and experiences. Two especially significant aspects of that experimentation were the coining of a number of new gendered terms, including *womanhood* and *femininity*, and the refashioning of others already in use, such as *motherhood*. This book suggests that Middle English writers used these words with remarkable eagerness to signal moments where the writers are particularly interested or invested in exploring new ideas about femininity. As suggested by the episode of the tournament women, some of the most vital issues are how to develop and define the larger idea of womanhood underlying more specific identities like wife or mother and how to construct women's relationship to different kinds of authority, generally masculine and frequently religious. Such concerns appear most prominently in connection with femininity in this period; *manhood* had already been in recorded use for at least 150 years before the analogous terms relating to women appeared in the written record.

While writers often carry out this linguistic and literary experimentation through or in relation to individual female characters like the Wife of Bath, I am most interested in the general concepts of womanhood formulated during this process. Few scholars have tackled that broader idea directly, although Sarah Salih has considered a specific gendered identity in the form of virginity and Jennifer Summit has traced the development and impact of the “woman writer” as a gendered category. Perhaps the work that most closely parallels this investigation of femininity is the recent research attending to medieval notions of masculinity. Isabel Davis, for instance, takes up representations of male selfhood in life writing and Holly Crocker considers Chaucer’s portrayals of masculinity in relation to questions of visibility and agency. Crocker’s concern with constructions of manhood roughly resembles mine with constructions of womanhood. While her analysis does not center on language, she does note the importance—and the slipperiness—of gendered vocabulary: “the Middle English *manhed* has several meanings, whose overlapping resonance indicate this identity’s potential fluidity.”

Although I am interested in the various gendered terms that writers created and adapted, I find *womanhood* to be particularly important, both because it directly invokes the conceptual problem of what defines women collectively, beyond specific experiences or roles, and because it was used so widely and in such interesting ways in the late Middle Ages. The word first appears in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower (associated with characters such as Criseyde, Griselda, Hippolyta, and Amans’s lady), but the invention of womanhood to which my title refers is a complex diachronic process that incorporated a wide set of usages and influences and that involved innovation at the level of both language and literary representation. This process continued into the 1400s as other writers adopted and adapted gendered terms and the related ideas. More than six centuries later,
we tend to think of much of this gendered vocabulary as self-evidently transparent: *womanhood*, for instance, means the condition of being a woman. But what it meant to be a woman—outside the traditional roles of maiden, wife, and widow—was very much an open question in the later Middle Ages and was becoming a more immediate concern after the outbreak of the plague. When Chaucer and Gower employ this new word, then, they do so with surprising precision. It does not mean simply the condition of being a woman but instead signifies particular elements of womanliness, from beauty to an ability to exercise intercessory influence. When later writers pick up *womanhood* and its sister terms to use in their own texts, they do so with a similar sense of the terms’ linguistic usefulness—indicating that this language addressed the gap that had developed between social reality and available vocabulary—but often with a different set of personal and poetic aims.

The gendered language that forms the focus of *Inventing Womanhood* occurs across a range of texts, but many of the earliest or most significant usages appear in literary texts, which privileged neologisms and linguistic creativity. Consequently, this book focuses both on literary texts and on the literary aspects of texts generally perceived to fall outside the canon. Most recent studies of medieval gender treat literary texts less often or less centrally than previous scholarship did; Chaucer was especially important for those earlier critics but Mary Erler, Rebecca Krug, Catherine Sanok, Nancy Bradley Warren, Claire Waters, and others have since incorporated other rich sources such as religious texts and documents related to family life. Some scholars focus on less well-known texts that we still consider literary, as in Theresa Coletti’s latest book on medieval drama. Nonetheless, while the foundational work by critics such as Susan Crane, Carolyn Dinshaw, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and Jill Mann has remained influential, canonical literature itself has become more peripheral. This shift in focus has uncovered valuable information about what Krug calls women’s “literate practices”—the many different ways in which they influenced the production, circulation, and reception of texts—and expanded our understanding of women’s representations in texts and roles in society more broadly. It has also illuminated vital connections between secular and religious texts that this project seeks to extend. Both literary and devotional texts, from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to Julian of Norwich’s *Shewings*, include innovative uses of the gendered terms under scrutiny here and influence the much wider spectrum of usage that evolves during the fifteenth century. This attention to the concepts of femininity signified by such language thus sheds new light on canonical literary authors while also participating in the ongoing reevaluation of fifteenth-century texts, which gender-based studies have significantly furthered.

Middle English writers’ rising interest in gendered language correlates with several important intellectual and social developments in the later fourteenth century. At the time, two common ways of classifying women were firmly entrenched: the threefold model defined by marital status (maiden, wife, or widow) and the binary
model based on religious types (the perfect Virgin Mary versus the sinful Eve). While the latter was most common in antifeminist texts, the former was integral to women’s identities in social, legal, and religious contexts. Both models, however, demonstrate the tendency to consider women in categories connected to male figures rather than collectively and autonomously. A number of historical shifts made these traditional ways of thinking inadequate and may have prompted Middle English writers to participate in what became the co-evolution of gender concepts and vocabulary.15 Medieval British society was changing in profound ways, affected both by key events (such as the plague and the peasants’ rebellion) and long-term trends (including the rise of the middle class, the development of affective piety, and increasing lay control over marriage); this confluence leads Judith Bennett to argue that 1350 may be the true watershed of the late Middle Ages.16 These historical developments had pronounced effects on women’s roles that created the need for new ways of thinking about and describing them.

We can see the changes already underway when the women Knighton describes appear in 1348, the same year as the first outbreak of the plague in England.17 The plague’s decimation of the population critically contributes to this historical divide, initiating some changes and intensifying others but, overall, increasing financial and social opportunities for women in ways that move even further beyond the extant paradigm. The high number of deaths meant that, by necessity, more economic prospects were open to women. Social convention still limited which opportunities were available and to whom (wealthy widows, for example, were best positioned to take advantage) and the opportunities began to decrease within a relatively short period of time;18 despite those caveats, however, these financial opportunities did noticeably affect women’s social choices. This same time period saw a move to later, companionate marriages and it appears that women’s greater economic prospects allowed them to delay marriage longer and exercise a greater degree of choice in their spouses.

Both married and single women also gained greater access to religious authority with the growing popularity of affective piety in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: the emphasis on personal visions and emotional responses to the humanity of Christ allowed women to position themselves as his mother or lover. They did not have to become nuns or anchorites in order to embrace spiritual devotion; the idea of the mixed life demonstrated how women could integrate intensive devotional practice into an otherwise secular lifestyle. The late fourteenth century also witnessed the rise of Lollardy, but research suggests that women found few opportunities there that were unavailable to them through orthodox religion, especially with these developments in lay piety, which allowed women like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe to participate in powerful religious vocations (though not without risk).19

This combination of factors and their effects on women’s experiences has led some historians to identify the period as a kind of “golden age” for medieval
women. That position has been sufficiently challenged by other scholars and I do not wish to revive the debate here. But the actual available roles for women outside of marriage and a family substantially increased in the late fourteenth century and ideas about what identities or occupations were appropriate for them underwent an abrupt expansion (before a subsequent contraction). For the purposes of this study, I am most interested in how these historical trends affected ideas about women and their possible roles rather than to what extent those changes were realized in real women’s lives.

Historical changes, then, open a gap between existing models for imagining womanhood and the potential roles and experiences of women in late medieval Britain. Not surprisingly, this conceptual gap is marked by a corresponding lexical one: David Burnley explains that linguists use the term “lexical gap” to describe that sociolinguistic condition wherein “radical alterations to [a] society and to its communicative needs . . . may leave a language lacking words for the new circumstances.” The use of new gendered vocabulary addresses both gaps and so the linguistic conditions of the period are another important part of the historical framework for this project. While Inventing Womanhood is not primarily a linguistic study, I do want to consider briefly the unusual nature of the gendered language that it foregrounds, specifically in relation to Chaucer’s linguistic practices since he has the earliest known uses of some of the most critical terms, including femininity and womanhood. Scholars have subjected Chaucer’s language to much more detailed scrutiny than any other medieval writer’s and it has been productively examined by Ardis Butterfield, Christopher Cannon, Simon Horobin, and others. Cannon has demonstrated that linguistic innovation was part of Middle English literary culture, often in response to source texts in other languages, and argues that Chaucer was typical in this regard; Cannon has also discovered that Chaucer tended to discard his coinages after a few uses, making room for more new words in his vocabulary and maintaining the performance of novelty. Womanhood, however—to take one key example—departs from these general practices. As the following chapter will establish, Chaucer adds the word to his sources rather than taking it from them and he continues to return to it, using it in some of his earliest short poems and many of his longer ones, including the Legend of Good Women, Troilus and Criseyde, and the Canterbury Tales.

This anomalous usage suggests the significance of the notion of womanhood to Chaucer and indicates an interest in representing women in ways that depart from tradition. The usage is further complicated by, in my interpretation, Gower’s role as a co-innovator in developing the meanings of womanhood and related terms as well as the long process of inventing the concepts being signified, which includes many adaptations throughout the fifteenth century. Because Chaucer and Gower were thinking about women in new ways (outside the extant identities of maiden, wife, and widow—all terms that were already in use), new abstractions were required.
Womanhood proves to be a popular one because of its ability to mediate different categories, such as secular and sacred, wife and mother, or female saint and courtly lady. The later uses of this and related terms by Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, the York dramatist, Osbern Bokenham, Margaret of Anjou, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, John Capgrave, the Digby dramatist, and many anonymous writers, confirm that these abstractions were useful for talking about women. Womanhood is one central manifestation of what appear to be more general preoccupations with how to represent women and with what qualities or opportunities they should or could have (including, perhaps most urgently, their access to authority).

Womanhood offered a way to investigate forms of feminine power, such as intercession and mediation, that can occur in a secular context, but the most established avenues to authority for women were spiritual. Both Warren and Coletti have demonstrated that religious traditions offered useful models and ample material for women to fashion claims not only to authority but also to political and social significance, while Carolyn Collette’s work on Anglo-French texts has shown that secular female agency depended on contemporary religious as well as political ideologies. Reexamining those models, some Middle English writers turned to another key term, motherhood. While womanhood was secular and human from the outset, motherhood originated as an explicitly sacred term, as did manhood and fatherhood; this pattern underscores that the concept of motherhood, particularly as embodied by the Virgin Mary, offered women their primary access to the divine. The first known occurrences of manhood in the 1200s and early 1300s, on the other hand, were theological and it was often paired with godhood or godhead to denote the two aspects of Christ’s nature. Motherhood and fatherhood came into use later, appearing in the fourteenth century. In both cases, the earliest uses of the terms were religious: fatherhood described God’s relationship to man or the relationship of male religious authority figures to those for whom they were responsible, while motherhood applied only to descriptions of Mary. More secular uses of motherhood (i.e., uses that involve human women) begin with Gower and Julian of Norwich. Particularly for women writers, this reimagined concept of motherhood with its connection to the most powerful female spiritual figure provides a model for authority that can be tweaked in fruitful ways.

Inventing Womanhood begins with the earliest appearances of the gendered language that strove to capture new concepts of femininity, reading womanhood as an interpretive key for two of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. In contrast to scholars who have seen gender as a minor issue in the Knight’s Tale and as either highly individual or fundamentally universal in the Clerk’s Tale, I argue that Chaucer reshapes both stories around the notion of womanhood and its connection to social power in the forms of intercession and submission. In the first narrative, Theseus brings his Amazon queen and her sister into Athenian courtly society, where the sister becomes an object of disruptive desire. In the latter, the marquis Walter marries the lower-class
Griselda and tests her by pretending to murder their children. Both tales radically transform the female characters—from Amazon warriors to Athenian ladies and from peasant maiden to marchioness—and they must verify that they possess the virtues of womanhood proper to their post-transformation roles. I identify submission as the crucial quality but confirm that Chaucer also considers the potential for feminine authority that can coexist with such deference. He further revises his sources to intensify the internal and generic contradictions that these characters represent. Although Walter’s motivations have puzzled critics, I propose that he tries Griselda’s womanhood by assessing her ability to reconcile her duties as a wife and mother; her behavior similarly incorporates elements from romance and hagiographic traditions. The *Knight’s Tale* probes the capability of Hippolyta and Emelye to subsume their Amazon natures within the Athenian model of womanhood and, by extension, to combine mythical legends with courtly literature. In Chaucer’s versions, Griselda negotiates these layered paradoxes successfully but the Amazons are never satisfactorily assimilated into royal society nor into womanhood itself.

While Chaucer may have the first recorded uses of many gendered terms, he is not the sole determiner of their meanings; my second chapter treats Gower’s equally influential explorations of these ideas through narratives of transformation in the *Confessio Amantis*. Critics have emphasized morality and aesthetics in Gower, but his representation of gender is innovative and in some ways more radical than Chaucer’s: Gower considers the multiplicity of human nature—which, in the *Confessio*, encompasses manhood, womanhood, and beastliness—and particularly figures or moments where those aspects overlap. This reading challenges early feminist readings of Gower as insensitive to women’s concerns and extends the work of Diane Watt, who has argued for his embrace of amorality and ambiguity. I show that Gower’s portrayals of beastly women in the tales of Florent, Tereus, Cornix, and Calistona reveal the unreliability of external evidence as a signifier of womanhood and that his portrayals of womanly men in the stories of Achilles and Deidamia, Sardanapalus, and Iphis indicate that feminine behaviors and desires are not innate but can be learned or feigned. The chapter then turns to the frame of the *Confessio* to posit that its traditionally recognized emphases on morality and politics are mediated through a third concern: gender. I contend that the lady for whom Amans harbors unrequited love is not, as critics have assumed, a conventional romance exemplar but instead the moral center of the text. Amans must learn how to balance the multiple facets of his own nature and then apply that knowledge by conceding his lady’s authority to refuse him; this requires him to use the lessons from the tales to resolve the disjunction between romance conventions and reality in interpreting both his own manhood and his lady’s womanhood.

The third chapter maintains that Lydgate and Henryson create their own significant versions of femininity, as signaled by their use of gendered language. The *Temple of Glas*, which has received little critical attention despite a recent rise of
interest in Lydgate’s poetry, describes a love affair between a lady and a knight brought together by Venus. I demonstrate that Lydgate imagines womanhood as a constraint on the lady that dictates her response to the knight’s advances as well as her behavior after marriage. Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid continues the story of Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, tracing Cresseid’s descent into poverty, illness, and finally death after leaving Troilus. I argue that Henryson portrays Cresseid’s womanhood as a condition of physical vulnerability; exploiting the etymological generality of womanhood, he expands it from a set of virtuous qualities or behaviors into an existential condition and thus approaches our modern usage. Countering the prevailing interpretation of this text as antifeminist, I show that Henryson critiques Chaucer’s portrayal of Criseyde, which claims to be sympathetic yet finally fails to offer any justification for her betrayal of Troilus. Even more directly than Chaucer and Gower, Lydgate illuminates the shortcomings of social models of gender while Henryson moves beyond those models entirely and approaches the modern conception of womanhood.

Turning to the women writing inside this intersection of gender and language (and also from poetic to devotional texts), my fourth chapter argues that Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich participated in the creation of new ideas about femininity associated with manipulations of gendered language but that, rather than creating or adopting a new term, they remake motherhood. This tactic allows them to take advantage of the existing model of womanhood that offers the strongest foundation for constructing a feminine form of power. Both writers selectively utilize the Virgin Mary as the spiritual and literary paragon of womanhood and exploit the slippage between biological and metaphorical motherhood in religious discourse to authorize women. Julian’s Shewings describes and interprets her visions, which inspire her theology of Jesus as mother. Although scholars have treated her mother imagery as primarily figurative, I show that she works to broaden the definition of motherhood and link the religious image more closely with human women. This expanded idea authorizes her text as a mothering gesture. Margery Kempe, wife and mother of fourteen children, chronicles her life and travels as a controversial spiritual figure in her Book. Critics have dismissed her motherhood as immaterial to her religious adventures; I demonstrate, however, that she combines Marian maternal imagery with the sexual imagery of affective piety to create herself as an unparalleled intimate of Christ. These women writers are an integral part of the social and literary culture from which the new gendered terms emerged and which they influenced, but Julian and Margery also mark out an alternate path through the Middle English possibilities for addressing the post-plague changes to ideas about womanhood.

The use of gendered terms rapidly expanded throughout the fifteenth century. While womanhood, for instance, first occurred in fourteenth-century canonical literature, it quickly spread to a wide variety of texts, including the Secretum Secreto-
rum, rolls of Parliament, royal correspondence, hagiography, drama, romance, and courtly love lyrics—where its usage became so common as to be almost de rigueur. The conclusion considers this final stage in the medieval evolution of womanhood, looking at how the gendered terms that appeared in the fourteenth century became crucial to fifteenth-century Middle English literary culture while the concepts denoted by those terms continued to change. It might be said that medieval women—like those in Knighton’s chronicle—invented womanhood, since their actions pushed the cultural boundaries that historical forces had begun to destabilize. If the invention of womanhood began as a social development, however, it quickly became a textual phenomenon for Middle English writers, who were able to experiment with radically new ways of imagining and representing women’s lives and identities.
CONCLUSION

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMANHOOD IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY DISCOURSE

What happens to womanhood as both the historical conditions that prompted new ideas about women and the gendered language that expressed such ideas continue to evolve? The previous chapters have examined how fourteenth-century writers—most notably, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and Julian of Norwich—fashioned or expanded concepts of womanhood and how some fifteenth-century writers, including John Lydgate, Robert Henryson, and Margery Kempe, reimagined those concepts in response to their own aesthetic and social concerns. In tracing that dynamic, this book has moved from focusing on the earliest occurrences of some gendered terms to later uses that were particularly significant in the development of their meanings. Over the course of the fifteenth century, however, changing notions about womanhood and the language employed to signify those notions appeared in a wide range of discourses and texts, from the rolls of Parliament to courtly love lyrics and from royal correspondence to hagiography. In this broader context, we can see the rapid evolution of these terms and ideas as they continued to take on individual and even idiosyncratic constructions but ultimately expanded to become more general abstractions (as we have seen with Henryson’s use of womanhood in the Testament).

By looking at many texts over a long range of time, we can identify larger-scale trends in the evolution of gendered language. The previous chapters examined fewer texts in greater detail, providing close looks at particular takes on and manipulations of womanhood. This conclusion surveys usage more broadly, exploring both the range of possibilities these terms represented (including which meanings are most common and which appear as outliers, and which discourses tend to use this language more often or in particular ways) and how the terms evolved over time (including when the popularity of a word waxes and wanes; how denotations expand, contract, or shift; and how various lines of influence converge or become distinct). Most of the texts I consider here do not foreground gendered
language in the same way the texts examined earlier did; however, these later texts do make significant use of different notions of and concerns about femininity. The terms receive less emphasis partly because they are becoming more familiar as they become more widely used: writers no longer need to attend as carefully to specifying meanings, even though they continue to use the concepts being denoted in innovative and significant ways.

The increasing use of gendered vocabulary testifies to the social and aesthetic utility of the terms; the fact that newly coined words denoting femininity not only persist but also evolve and spread indicates that they were indeed filling the conceptual and lexical gaps described in the introduction. Recent scholarship by James Simpson, Nancy Bradley Warren, and others has reevaluated the fifteenth century and renewed attention to its aesthetic and intellectual developments; it is now recognized as a significant period in its own right (measured in part by the quality of literary and devotional texts that it produced). Writers’ adaptations of terms like womanhood and femininity during this period indicate that gendered language was another area in which they built on their fourteenth-century inheritance rather than merely imitating it.

Not surprisingly, the fundamental dynamic of gendered language in the fifteenth century was one of broadening meanings. This phenomenon happened in different ways with different words; while motherhood became broader as it was increasingly used to denote a human relationship in addition to a spiritual one, for instance, sisterhood grew to include the relationship between nuns in a convent as well as a familial connection. Even as terms like womanhood and femininity become more general, however, they do not entirely collapse into synonyms. Chaucer’s single use of femininity—the first recorded appearance of this term, which is of French and Latin extraction—offers negative connotations. In the Man of Law’s Tale, the narrator apostrophizes the Sultan’s mother, Constance’s first evil mother-in-law: “O serpent under femynynytee, / l ik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!” About a century later, the Digby Mary Magdalene manipulates such connotations in order to highlight the dual nature of its title character; the first half of the play employs féminité to present women as fleshly, shallow, and changeable but, by the second half, the term develops a positive association with the Virgin Mary. The dramatist reserves womanhood for the invocation that inspires Mary Magdalene’s one miracle: when the queen of Marseilles appeals to Mary as the “flower of wommanned,” she saves both the queen and her child. The term is not only positive but also—as we have seen in previous chapters—closely associated with exercises of feminine power.

The etymological components of womanhood set it up to function as a broad term, denoting the condition of being a woman; its association with prominent concerns (such as feminine authority) may also have contributed to its popularity. This combination of factors means that womanhood remains a critical signal of
when new ideas about women are at stake in a text. Like other examples of gendered vocabulary in the fifteenth century, it can still carry specific meanings but the overall move is toward generalization. One of the more unusual occurrences, for instance, is in a Middle English version of the Secretum Secretorum, a popular text that belonged to the mirrors for princes tradition but also included an encyclopedic collection of information on various topics.5 The section on physiognomy explains the significance of physical features in men, such as hairy eyebrows, large nostrils, short necks, fleshy feet, and broad toes, and interprets different types of male voices: “Who þat has a grete voyce and wele souned, he es batus and eloquent, þat es to say pertly spekyngge. To smalle voyce tokenes foly and wommanhede.”6 This text seems to use womanhood to indicate effeminacy rather than a more straightforward womanliness.7 But this usage, which comes right around 1400, still suggests collectivity since it implies that certain characteristics are common to women and are correspondingly inappropriate or undesirable for men.

The tendency toward generality becomes more pronounced over time. A later appearance of womanhood in the rolls of Parliament from 1472–73 demonstrates how far the term has moved along the spectrum from individual quality to shared condition. A complaint from Sir John Ashton describes how his house came under assault; perhaps to lend pathos, Ashton details his wife’s fear, explaining that she had recently given birth and “was in right grete dispaye of hir lyfe, and by grete space then after so contynued, and in like wyse the said gentilwomen then with hir accordyng to the lawes of God and womanhode as is aforesaid accompayned were in grete dispaye of their lyves.”8 The phrase “the lawes of . . . womanhode” seems to refer to the practice of a group of women accompanying a new mother—a literal kind of collectivity, but also a reference to how women as a whole behave or what customs they observe among themselves.

Ashton portrays womanhood in a positive light; a large subset of texts associated it even more directly with a feminine ideal and the term became widely used to signify that ideal, especially in romantic contexts. Middle English love lyrics—a genre that became widespread during the fifteenth century9—made copious use of the term, sometimes on its own and sometimes within the conventional phrase “flower of womanhood” (which we have seen Henryson exploit to memorable effect).10 “Thair sall no vþir in-to þis warld, but dreid, / Depairt me fra þe flour of womanheid,” proclaims the lover in “Sweet Enslavement.”11 And the speaker from “The Parliament of Love” instructs, “Go, thow litle songe, thow hast a blisfull day; / For sche þat is the floure of wommanhode / At her oown leyser schall the syng and rede.”12 Most often—and in far too many cases to cite individually here—we find poets using the word independently to convey the same sense of beauty, virtue, and all-around excellence. In “To His Mistress, Root of Gentleness,” the lover describes his beloved as possessing “Bounte, beaute, and perfyte whomanhode.”13 Similarly, the speaker in “To His Mistress, Flower of Womanhood” says to his lady, “And
sethe that ye are flour of bewte, / Constreyned y am, magrie myn hede, / hartely to loue youre womanhede.”14 “An Envoy to His Mistress” opens with this plea: “O Bewtie pereles, and right so womanhod, / ffor the grete honour and vertue in you I see.”15 Perhaps most general of all is Lydgate’s “A Ballade, Of Her that Hath All Virtues,” which inquires, “What shoulde I more reherce of wommanhede? / Yee beon þe myrrour and verray exemplayre.”16 While the concept of ideal femininity existed before the term womanhood was coined, its ability to signify so many different aspects in such a compressed space made the relatively new term well suited for this rising genre.

The most interesting uses of gendered language during the fifteenth century, however, continue to be those associated with new or unusual models of womanhood and particularly those that involve questions of female power. In the York cycle plays, for example, Pilate’s wife both symbolizes and contributes to his power and her self-portrait invokes new notions of womanhood in that problematic context: “I am dame precious Percula, of prynces þe prise, / Wiffe to ser Pilate here, prince withouten pere. / All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise, / Con-sayue nowe my countenaunce so comly and clere.”17 This usage crosses genres: Percula is a secular character in a biblical drama, manipulating notions of feminine excellence most frequently found in courtly love lyrics to assert her authority in a political and religious context. Queen Margaret is another female figure whose claims to authority were contentious and who recast concepts of femininity.18 The incapacity of her husband, King Henry VI, and her son’s young age led her to seek the regency in 1454 (albeit unsuccessfully) and to become a forceful advocate for and later leader of the Lancastrian cause.19 In her correspondence, she argues that other kings should consider themselves injured by the actions against her deposed and now fugitive husband, just as “wymmen, whanne any thynge is done to the dishonoure of wymmenhode.”20 Margaret’s critics cast her as power hungry and masculine,21 but this letter hints at her attempts to reconcile the political demands of her royal status with the cultural demands of gender stereotypes: womanhood, like kinghood, is an honorable condition that requires vigorous defense.

While they present womanhood in a positive light, both Percula and Margaret might carry negative associations; however, other texts invoked new models of womanhood that incorporated substantial power in relation to more admirable figures. The anonymous romance Ipomadon, preserved in a late fifteenth-century manuscript and one of several Middle English versions of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman romance Ipomedon by Hue de Rotelande, makes a notable departure from its source by portraying the central female character more positively.22 After the heroine is orphaned as a young girl, the lords decide that an unnamed but highly virtuous man will raise her: “The moste worthely man and wyse / Shuld kepe this lady mekyll of pryse, / And teche hur womanhode.”23 The enterprise is successful insofar as she grows up to be a typically lovely and honorable romance
heroine, but she also departs from type by becoming “the Fere,” or the proud one, and openly insisting that she will only marry “the best knyghte.” The original poem appears to critique the Fere, treating both women and courtly love ironically; while the Middle English version retains the nickname, the anonymous poet introduces it in the midst of a catalogue of the Fere’s excellent qualities and discourages any scrutiny of her upbringing by making it impossible to discern which of those qualities were inherent and which the wise and worthy guardian instilled in her. Rather than problematizing or interrogating womanhood, the English text mitigates Hue’s sharper depiction of the Fere by both drawing attention to her womanhood and encouraging us to accept it as exemplary.

John Capgrave’s depiction of Katherine of Alexandria is even more exemplary and, because it struggles directly with different conceptions of womanhood, even more intriguing. Katherine was “the most important saint in late medieval England” and Capgrave’s version of her life was the most detailed and among the most popular. In the context of ongoing reevaluations of the fifteenth century and the growing interest in hagiographic and religious texts among feminists in particular, both Capgrave and Katherine are attracting more scholarly attention, with his Life of Saint Katherine at the conjunction of those larger concerns. The text merits substantial consideration here because it is preoccupied by contrary models of womanhood, secular and religious, and it stages an explicit search for a new and more expansive model that can accommodate the unusual experiences and desires of Katherine. In the process, Capgrave shows both how many things have changed since womanhood and its sister terms were coined and how useful that language and the narrative strategies associated with it continue to be. He must draw on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century innovations in this area because Katherine is such an extraordinary female character: a queen who is also a scholar; a maiden whose desire for virginity predates her conversion; and a woman who becomes Christ’s wife, a martyr, and a saint in short order.

Ideas of femininity are at issue in the two major debate scenes, the marriage debate between Katherine and her advisors and the theological debate between Katherine and the philosophers. As the ruler of Alexandria, Katherine challenges her council’s notion of femininity by insisting that she wishes to remain single and is capable of ruling without a husband. “It is full perlyous,” argues an earl, “to be a mayde / And eke a qween,” hinting that these two female identities, as Katherine embodies them, are incompatible. “Why hate ye now that ilk lady must have?” an admiral asks in exasperation, trying simultaneously to comprehend and undermine her insistent rejection of convention (2.884). Later, as a Christian martyr, Katherine undermines her persecutor’s idea of maidenhood by refusing to be seduced by persuasive speeches and appeals to her vanity. This strategy is his last-ditch effort; he reasons, “There is non othir botte / Onto this mayden whech is so stedfast / But fayre wordes, whech draw womanhoode / And makith hem often othir thingis to
tast / Than thei shulde do if thei wold be chast” (5.330–36). He fails to recognize that his concept of womanhood does not apply to Katherine.

There is only one paradigm of womanhood that does pertain: the Virgin Mary’s. By chronicling Katherine’s pre-conversion life in unusual detail, Capgrave shows her remarkable characteristics and accomplishments in a secular as well as a spiritual context; they not only make more sense but also take on more meaning in the latter, where the model of the Virgin Mary renders them legible. When Mary sends the monk Adrian to convert Katherine, he catches her attention by insinuating that his faith can offer her a new model of womanhood. He tells Katherine that he knows a woman who is greater, more beautiful, and more powerful than she is: “I may thee more boldely mak this commendyng: / Sche paseth yow, certeyn, in all maner thing” (3.454–55). This claim, which directly contradicts the flattery of her lords as well as Katherine’s own sense of her status, makes a profound impression. Astounded, she marvels at Adrian’s statement “More than sche dyd evyr hir lyve before / Of ony mater” (3.464–65).

When she finally brings herself to speak, Katherine first responds as if she has been insulted but soon reveals an intense curiosity about this new exemplar of femininity. The complex passage is worth quoting at length:

How may youre Lady be so worthy woman

As ye commende now in your tale to me,
Of hir hye worchepe and also of hir wytte?
The worthyest of all women we wene that we be—
We herd nevyr of non worthyere ytte!
Wher lyghtte hir londe? We wold fayn know itte.
Who is hir lorde—or wheyther is sche lordelees?
Ye telle us thingys whech we holde but lees!

Whethyr is that dame lyvyng in spousayle
Or leyth sche sool as we do now?
If sche be weddyd, sykyrly sche may fayle
Mych of hir wyll, for sche mote nedys bowe
Onto hir lord, loke he nevyr so row;
And if sche lyve be hirself alone,
Than may sche make full oft mech mone,

Ryght for vexacyoun of hir lordes aboute—
This know we well; we are used ther-to!
Therfor, goodeman, put us oute of doute:
Tell us the sothe, be it joye or woo,
Although Katherine begins her speech defensive and suspicious, her words betray a growing excitement by the end. She finds it hard to believe that such a woman exists, but she is intrigued by the possibility. The mystery woman (who turns out to be Mary) might be not only a peer but also a model for Katherine, who wonders whether the woman has resolved the dilemmas that Katherine herself has encountered in trying to live out this unusual form of womanhood. This passage resembles Knighton's description of the troop of cross-dressing women discussed in the introduction in that both reveal the need for new models of womanhood; by the fifteenth century, however, linguistic, literary, and social precedents provide Capgrave with the necessary material to fashion such a model in his text.

The *Life of Saint Katherine* brings together some of the gendered terms favored by Chaucer, Gower, and their male followers with tactics utilized by Julian and Margery for constructing feminine authority in the mode of the Virgin Mary to create a version of womanhood that is both particularly Capgrave's and particularly appropriate for the saint's life he is writing. He stages a collision between spiritual and secular notions of womanhood, associating the term itself more strongly with the latter (and thus recalling its origins as secular rather than religious) while suggesting that the idea must be enlarged to accommodate more meanings and interpretations. This text is consistent with the fifteenth-century tendency to relate *womanhood* to an ideal femininity, but it also deals squarely with issues of feminine power. As a result, it illustrates how the two primary sets of meanings during the period could be combined and suggests that the capacious nature of *womanhood* and its related terms allows the bridging rather than the calcifying of differences. The *Life of Saint Katherine* also reaches back to the fourteenth-century emphasis on the mediating power of womanhood, which offered a conceptual space for bringing together and working through divergent definitions of women's roles. Chaucer's Griselda had to reconcile the competing demands of wifehood and motherhood, making her spiritual virtues signify in a secular context; Capgrave’s Katherine struggles with precedents and expectations for maidenhood and womanhood, discovering that her secular virtues fit more comfortably in a spiritual context. In both cases, the conflict can only be mediated within and by ideas of womanhood.

The examples in this study show the interdependent evolution of concepts of gender and gendered language; I have suggested both that the experiences of women and ideas about femininity outstripped the available vocabulary and that the creation of new vocabulary enabled writers to experiment with new ways of thinking about womanhood. Such experimentation was all the more possible because the terms on which I have focused were collective as well as abstract; they allowed for
the consideration of relationships between central and marginal characteristics or cases of femininity and between otherwise incompatible precedents or stereotypes. By positing broad categories, these terms invited explorations of how much might be encompassed and where the borders might be drawn. The process of evolution is never simple or unidirectional, of course; even as denotations are broadening in the fifteenth century, for example, there are two divergent strands of association (with ideal femininity and with questions of female power). Indeed, the ability to contain divergent meanings must have been part of what made these gendered terms so useful and widely adopted.

By looking at Middle English texts, we can see the heterogeneous origins of some of our most important gendered vocabulary and the variety of meanings such terms held from their earliest usages. Recent studies and theories have examined the important function of language in gender construction, but scholars have not attended as deeply to the history of the vocabulary—womanhood, manhood, femininity, masculinity, etc.—that allows us fundamentally to describe gender. Experimenting with representations of women outside of the conventional identities dependent on relationships to masculine authority, Middle English writers confront a variety of challenges—not the least of which is the problem of how to reconcile feminine virtue and authority. At the same time, the gendered language writers now have to describe women in new ways continues to evolve, accumulating different meanings but becoming progressively broader. The invention of womanhood is not the work of a single moment, a single author, or a single word but instead a lengthy and complex process furthered both by women whose lives incorporated expanding opportunities and challenging circumstances, like Margery Kempe and Queen Margaret, and by the writers, male as well as female, who sought fresh ways of representing women and their experiences.
Introduction

1. Illis diebus ortus est rumor et ingens clamor in populo eo quod ubi hastiludia prosequebantur, quasi in quolibet loco dominarum cohors affuit, quasi comes interludii in diuero et mirabili apparatu uirili, ad numerum quandoque quasi .xl. quandoque .x. dominarum, de speciosioribus et pulcrioribus, non melioribus tocius regni, in tunicis partitis scilicet una parte de una secta, et altera de alia secta, cum capuciis breuibus et liripiis ad modum cordarum circa capud aduolutis, et ʒonis argento vel auro bene circumstipatis in externuero ventris sub umbilico habentes cultellos quos daggerios walgaliter dicunt, in powchiis desuper impositis. Et sic procedebant in electis dextrariis vel aliis equis bene comptis de loco ad locum hastiludiorum. Et tali modo expendebant et deuastabant bona sua, et corpora sua ludibriis et scurilosis lasciuiis uexitabant, ut rumor populi personabat.

2. My interest in gendered language thus separates this project from Catherine Cox’s *Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), which is focused on gender and textuality or, in other words, on the more symbolic deployment of the feminine.

3. This argument is also supported by the term *womankind*, which—although first used in the thirteenth century—also began to appear more widely in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.


7. Although Seth Lerer’s *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) appeared after I had titled this project, both titles reflect this sense of English as a language that is not simply evolving but also being created consciously through a variety of specific texts and circumstances.


13. Warren’s work has been particularly important in this regard.

14. As David Burnley points out, there is a relationship between language and perception specifically associated with these three female roles: “The triplet maiden, wife, widow, which

15. The historical changes in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries affected not only gendered language but also the language and imagery needed to describe political power; see Lynn Staley, Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); and Paul Strohm, Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).


19. Shannon McSheffrey has persuasively argued that Lollardy drew more men than women because “Lollards most virulently attacked precisely those aspects of late medieval Catholicism that . . . were both attractive to, and to a large extent created by, women,” such as the cult of saints (Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420–1550 [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995], 138). The claim that heresy empowered women rests on the Lollard argument that any good person could be a priest; however, because the Lollards rejected transubstantiation, the priestly role did not have the same significance in their view that it had in Catholicism. Rather than valuing women more highly, the Lollard position on female priests devalued the role of priests. Furthermore, although there were Lollard female preachers, there is no definitive evidence that there were female priests. See Margaret Aston, Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion (London: Hambledon Press, 1984).


22. Burnley goes on to note that “The same situation may, however, arise more slowly as the
product of cultural evolution, and in either case, if the deficit occurs in some highly structured area of the lexis, it is often referred to as a ‘lexical gap’” (“Lexis and Semantics,” 489).

23. Chaucer and Gower are also the first known writers in English to use Femenie (to name the land of the Amazons) and among the first to use feminine. Chaucer has the earliest recorded usage of wifehood and wifely, while Gower has the first of sisterhood. “Wommanhede,” “femininite,” “Femenie,” “feminine,” “wifhode,” “wifli,” and “susterhede,” Middle English Dictionary (Middle English Compendium), <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med>. All subsequent references to the MED will be to this version unless otherwise noted.


25. Cannon, Making of Chaucer’s English, especially pp. 55, 77, and 120.


27. “Manhede,” “moderhede,” and “faderhod,” MED.

Chapter One


2. See, for example, Catherine Sanok’s exploration of Chaucer and hagiographic exemplarity in Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), chs. 2 and 6; and Claire Waters’s consideration of Chaucer in relation to medieval preaching in Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), chs. 2 and 7. Susan Phillips is interested in Chaucer’s adaptation of gossip as a literary strategy as well as his representations of the concept in Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), ch. 2.

3. In his latest book, Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Alcuin Blamires suggests that “what is needed now is a period of consolidation, defining gender formulations in Chaucer’s poetry with greater precision in relation to the various medieval discourses through and against which his formulations are positioned” (3). This chapter advances that aim by considering “gender formulations” through the lens of gendered language.


7. The project of defining womanhood is an interesting corollary to an investigation of knighthood, which many critics have read as the purpose of the tale. See Laurel Amtower, “Mimetic Desire and the Misappropriation of the Ideal in the Knight’s Tale,” *Exemplaria* 8.1 (1996): 125–44; and Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991)., ch. 3.


10. “Femenie,” *Middle English Dictionary (Middle English Compendium)*, <http://ets.umdli.umich.edu/m/med>. All subsequent references to the MED will be to this version unless otherwise noted. Gower also uses this term.

11. The Knight does use the term “Amazones” once (880), but it seems to refer to the land or the people as a whole (syntactically equivalent to “Arthenes”) rather than to the sisters specifically.

12. This contrasts sharply with the tale’s epigraph from Statius’s *Thebeid*, which describes the “Scithian folk,” lacking any specific gender reference.


14. Abby Wettan Kleinbaum argues that “in the hands of Chaucer and Boccaccio . . . [the Amazons’] image was even further weakened: they were shorn of their warrior determination and prowess.” She goes on to say that in the Knight’s Tale, Hippolyta “is only incidentally an Amazon. It is her sister Emily who is a beauty and neither woman has formidable strength. Hippolyta is just the woman whom Theseus happened to marry, and she is hardly noticeable. Her Amazon past is far behind her, and she is a dutiful and obedient helpmeet” (*The War against the Amazons* [New York: New Press, 1983], 61).


17. This is a common feature of Amazon stories: “solitary images were passed on rather than
the image of a collective horde of women who could have conquered men or held their own as peers” (Weinbaum, Islands of Women, 11).


19. Fowler, “Chaucer’s Hard Cases,” in Medieval Crime and Social Control, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Fowler is interested in some of the same textual gaps in the Amazons’ portrayals that I discuss, but she considers them in the context of political philosophy.


21. This does not discount the possibility that the tale is more interested in the relationship between these two suitors than in their love for Emelye; see John M. Bowers, “Three Readings of the Knight’s Tale: Sir John Clanvowe, Geoffrey Chaucer, and James I of Scotland,” Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 34.2 (Spring 2004): 279–307.

22. See line 1452. In Chaucer, there are two suitors, but in Boccaccio there are three.

23. Mandeville explains that the women have “lemanys to whom they may gon to whan they lestyn to haue bodily lykynge of hem” and that sons are killed or given to their fathers while daughters are raised as Amazons (Mandeville’s Travels, 85).

24. Elizabeth Robertson considers the different meanings of virginity in pagan and Christian cultures, suggesting that “Emelye wishes to make such a choice of [Christian contemplative] religious life, but that choice has no practical legitimacy in the world of Athens” (“Marriage, Mutual Consent, and the Affirmation of the Female Subject in the Knight’s Tale, the Wife of Bath’s Tale, and the Franklin’s Tale,” in Drama, Narrative, and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales, ed. Wendy Harding [Toulouse, France: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2003], 183).

25. Elizabeth B. Edwards reads Emelye and Palamon’s marriage as accomplishing the work of mourning in the Knight’s Tale; their marriage also supplants the mourning and Emelye’s participation in the more recognizable rituals of mourning is obscured (“Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale and the Work of Mourning,” Exemplaria 20.4 [Winter 2008]: 361–84).


27. Similar descriptions of Emelye wounding the men reappear later in her absence, part of the prelude to violence between Palamon and Arcite (1567–68).


30. Havelly, Chaucer’s Boccaccio, 113. “. . . e in man dui / istral dorati tene” and “Si, e’ m’ha piagato in guisa tal che di dolor m’acora” (Teseida, III.16 and 17).

31. Havelly, Chaucer’s Boccaccio, 113. “Io non so che nel cor quel fiero arcieri / m’ha saettato, che mi to’ la vita” and “sì m’è fissa nel cor la sua figura, / e sì mi sta nell’animo piacente” (Teseida, III.20 and 21).

Iipolita era a maraviglia bella;  
e di valore accesa nel coraggio;  
e ella sembiava matutina stella  
o fresca rosa del mese di maggio;  
giovine assai e ancora pulcella,  
ricca d’avere, e di real legnaggio,  
savia e ben costumata, e per natura  
nell’armi ardita e fiera oltre misura. (*Tesidea*, I.125)
37. The Knight expends more lines commenting on the length of his tale than covering the events he will not describe, ten total (875–76, 885–92) versus eight total (877–83).
39. The problem is complicated, of course, by the fact that most of Chaucer’s female fictional characters are upper class and others (like Alison in the *Miller’s Tale* or the Wife of Bath) are presented in contexts or genres where feminine virtue is less directly invoked.
40. Hansen points out that “the Theban widows, who are represented as proper, submissive, defeated, and dependent . . . thus serve as a crucial part of the narrative strategy that defines Woman.” She also notes the parallel between the widows’ scene and the intercession scene that I discuss here, though not in the same detail or to the same end (*Fictions of Gender*, 218 and 220).
41. Wallace argues that the *Knight’s Tale* presents a version of polity in which the autocratic ruler does not allow himself to be counseled by a consort (*Chaucerian Polity*, 107 and Chapter 4: “No Felaweshipe”: Thesian Polity, passim). While this is true to a large extent, it is also true that several of the decisions in the story—including the decisions to battle Creon and to spare Arcite and Palamon—are influenced by the interventions of women. Similarly, Fowler contends that the tale implicitly critiques the model of conquest by showing how it endangers the social bonds—especially marriage—that would be formed through consent (“Chaucer’s hard Cases,” 132–33). Jill Mann, on the other hand, argues that Chaucer presents the quality of pity—exhibited by Theseus as well as by the women—as an heroic virtue appropriate to both men and women (*Feminizing Chaucer* [Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2002], 134–42).
42. The intercession scene is frequently discussed by critics. See, for example, Wallace’s discussion of Hippolyta’s silence and Thesian polity (*Chaucerian Polity*, 104–5 and 119) and Crane’s discussion of the scene (*Gender and Romance*, 22).
43. Havely, *Chaucer’s Boccaccio*, 121. “Non piaccia a Dio che sia / ciò che dimandi, ben che meritato / l’aggiate per la vostra gran follia” (*Tesidea*, V.91).
44. Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 116. Invoking postcolonial theory, Keiko Hamaguchi reads this scene as an instance of mimicry and also suggests that such mimicry indicates that the Amazons’ assimilation is incomplete (“Domesticating Amazons in *The Knight’s Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 [2004]: 342–46).
46. Strohm, “Queens as Intercessors,” *Hochon’s Arrow*, 95 (emphasis in original).


50. David Wallace has argued that Chaucer exploited the contradictions in Petrarch’s version of the story in order to critique the tyranny associated with Petrarch; here I read some of the same aspects of the tale as allowing Chaucer’s examination of the category of womanhood (*Chaucerian Polity*, ch. 10). Mark Miller also examines these extremes through a philosophical lens (*Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], ch. 6).

51. Hansen and, to a lesser extent, Dinshaw and Wallace see Walter as primarily a reaction- ary, while those who focus on the marquis and his possible motivations, such as Kathryn L. Lynch, “Despoiling Griselda: Chaucer's Walter and the Problem of Knowledge in *The Clerk's Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 (1988): 41–70; Andrew Sprung, “If It Youre Wille Be: Coercion and Compliance in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” *Exemplaria* 7.2 (1995): 345–69; and Thomas A. Van, “Walter at the Stake: A Reading of Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” *Chaucer Review* 22.3 (1988): 214–24, tend to flatten out the complexities in Chaucer’s portrayal of Griselda. Many of these readings have been influenced by Robert O. Payne’s early interpretation of the tale as a “sentimental experiment” in which Chaucer seems to be “working toward a . . . moral statement which will be immediately apprehensible emotionally and nearly incomprehensible by any rational or intellectual faculty” (*The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer’s Poetics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963], 164). In such a reading, there is no need to seek intelligibility in either Walter or Griselda. By contrast, I will argue that Walter plays a vital role in the construction of Griselda’s exemplary womanhood; if Griselda is a mediating figure, then Walter necessarily becomes slightly more rational or at least intelligible.


58. For example, Morse observes that Chaucer was “the first to set her [Griselda] against the antifeminist type of woman, perhaps in the translation itself, certainly in the responses he invents to the tale at its end” (“The Exemplary Griselda,” 55).

59. Susan Crane observes that “Griselda’s imagined performance of marriage articulates
social understandings of wifehood” and that “Chaucer’s version sharply interrogates women’s place in marriage. Chaucer took that cue from the French versions of the tale, which are particularly concerned to model conduct for women” (The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002], 29). I agree, but would add that Chaucer also takes his cue from contemporary hagiography, from which the tale draws.


62. Petrarch, Epistola, in Severs, Literary Relationships, 288; for an alternate version, see Farrell and Goodwin, “The Clerk’s Tale,” 129 and 26n. In the Decameron, the story is addressed to women but has a mixed audience and is on the topic of governance. De Mézières follows Petrarch in offering Griselda as a female and human model. Le Ménagier presents the story in a conduct book for a young wife, but the writer asks his wife not to take it as an example for herself (Severs, Literary Relationships, 22). The play is written “in order that people can use [it] as a mirror, and in order that those ladies who are visited by adversity can bear it with patience” (Brownlee, 876; see full reference below). Note that all of the French versions rely (directly or indirectly) on Petrarch rather than Boccaccio. For a discussion of the differences between some of these versions, see Kevin Brownlee, “Commentary and the Rhetoric of Exemplarity: Griseldis in Petrarch, Philippe de Mézières, and the Estoire,” South Atlantic Quarterly 91.4 (Fall 1992): 865–90.

63. This is particularly interesting because one possible antecedent of the tale, Cupid and Psyche folktales, could involve human protagonists of either sex/gender. However, this proposed precursor (Griffith’s) is no longer widely accepted; William E. Bettridge and Francis L. Utley suggest “The Patience of a Princess,” which does depend on a female protagonist, instead (“New Light on the Origin of the Griselda Story,” Texas Studies in Literature and Language 13.2 [Summer 1971]: 153–208).

64. Bronfman, Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, 17.

65. See, for example, Mann: “the most obvious testimony to Griselda’s strength is the tale’s ending. . . . For it is not Griselda who gives way under the pressures of her trial, but Walter. . . . [T]he story does not simply illustrate the virtue of patience; it shows that patience conquers” (Feminizing Chaucer, 119; emphasis in original).

66. Dante Alighieri, La Vita Nuova, ed. and trans. Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 46–47: “In quello punto dico veramente che lo spirito de la vita, lo quale dimora ne la secretissima camera de lo cuore, cominciò a tremare si fortemente, che apparia ne li menimi polsi orribilmente; e tremando disse queste parole: ‘Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi.’”


68. Havely, Chaucer’s Boccaccio, 113.

69. See especially Morse, “Exemplary Griselda.”

70. Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin,


73. Walter’s first sight of Griselda seemed to validate her “wommanhede,” since it was the basis of his choice. However, he insists on excessive submission from her as a condition, which suggests that her behavior may be in doubt.

74. For instance, Dinshaw grounds her reading in the trope of *translatio*, titling the relevant chapter “Griselda Translated” (*Sexual Poetics*, ch. 5). Wallace also makes important use of the trope in his reading of the tale (*Chaucerian Polity*, ch. 10), as does Emma Campbell in “Sexual Poetics and the Politics of Translation in the Tale of Griselda,” *Comparative Literature* 55.3 (Summer 2003): 191–216. Crane is an exception; in *The Performance of Self*, she investigates Griselda’s clothing as a material expression of identity and its role in the ritual of marriage (29–37). Andrea Denny-Brown also considers the material aesthetics of the Clerk through this scene and the tale’s general preoccupation with clothing in “*Povre Griselda* and the All-Consuming *Archewhyve*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28 (2006): 77–115.

75. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “The Griselda Complex: Dowry and Marriage Gifts in the Quattrocento,” in her *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 245. Consciously or not, Chaucer’s emphasis on clothing and dowry echoes some of the issues in medieval Italian wedding customs, which are appropriate to the story’s Italian setting and provenance.


77. Crane goes on to argue that this reclothing “leaves visible a residual self that remains unincorporated” (*Performance of Self*, 33).


80. The undoing of the translation does not work; as she walks home, her father tries to cover her with her old coat “But on hire body myghte he it nat brynge, / For rude was the clooth, and moore of age / by dayes fele than at hire mariage” (915–17).


82. “Lust” is reiterated as the term for Walter’s self-interested desires; Griselda is grieved to leave her husband but does so, “abidynge evere his lust and his plesance” (757) and when she returns to prepare for the new wife, Walter directs Griselda to array the chambers “in ordinaunce / After my lust” (961–62).

83. The son was two years old when he was taken away (617) and is seven when he returns (780).


85. Morse sees the people not as a crucial part of Griselda’s testing, as I argue, but as themselves subject to a similar test: “The testing of Griselda proves to be also the testing of the people,

86. Alcuin Blamires, the only other critic to have paid substantial attention to this phrase, reads the meaning of “wommanheede” in this scene differently:

Womanhood remains unexplained here and seems at first sight peculiar. In conventional Middle English, a test of someone’s manhode would signify a test of his courage. However, from a question asked at 698–9, about what more a stern husband could do “to preve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse”, it seems that in The Clerk’s Tale Griselda’s “wifehood” and her “steadfastness” are symbiotic: one might conjecture that her womanhood and her steadfastness are similarly meant to be symbiotic in this tale. That is to say, in “assaying” (investigating the quality of) Griselda’s womanhood, Walter is investigating the degree of stabilitas in her, he is determining the level of unchangeability in her because this was the supreme criterion for assessing women in a culture obsessed with feminine “weakness.” (Blamires, The Case for Women in Medieval Culture [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 167–68)

The question of Griselda’s womanhood is broader, however; it is not only about her stabilitas, but also about her ability to combine different models of femininity while maintaining appropriate feminine virtues to an exemplary degree.

87. “Let those who believed the opposite know me painstaking and testing, not impious. I have proved my wife rather than condemning her [Sciant qui contrarium crediderunt me curiosum atque experientem esse, non [impium]; probasse coniugem, non dampnasse]” and “I did what I did only to test and try you [moy avoir fait ce que j’ay fait pour toy approuver et essaier tant seulement]” (Farrell and Goodwin, “The Clerk’s Tale,” 128–29 and 164–65). See also Severs, Literary Relationships, 286 and 287.

88. Laura Ashe argues that Griselda actually transforms Walter through her reading of her husband as good and his love for her as powerful: “Ultimately, Griselda’s reading of Walter is powerful enough to become his salvation. . . . [S]he reads him as beneficent and just: and so he is saved from himself” (“Reading Like a Clerk in the Clerk’s Tale,” Modern Language Review 101.4 (October 2006), 942–43).

89. These multiple endings of the tale have invited multiple interpretations. Many critics have discussed the envoy in response to Muscatine’s view of it as a comic strategy (French Tradition, 197). For the connections to (and distinctions from) Petrarch that Chaucer constructs, see Wallace, Chaucerian Polity, 293; and Campbell, “Politics of Translation,” especially pp. 211–14. The multiple endings have also produced divergent interpretations of the tale’s treatment of women (and specifically Griselda). Dinshaw suggests that the Clerk “addresses himself, finally, not to another man—he does not pass his text on from clerk to clerk—but to women” (Sexual Poetics, 152), while Hansen argues that “the Clerk’s humorous ending deflates rather than protects Griselda’s virtue. . . . [He] devalues and dismisses the feminine powers of silence without liberating women from the complementary myths of absence or excess” (Fictions of Gender, 205). For an overview of the polyvalent morality of the tale, see J. Allan Mitchell, “Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale and

90. We might read “secte” as “sex” or as a more exclusive subset of that sex. The latter reading is best supported by the text and by the later address to “archewyves,” another Chaucerian coinage that seems to describe a particular group of women (1195).

Chapter Two


5. Choosing to write the *Confessio Amantis* in English, Gower manipulates the vernacular to achieve both precision and ambiguity. Götz Schmitz contends that Gower’s “main concern is with the ambiguity of words and with the danger inherent in the fact that words can be used to both good and evil ends” (“Rhetoric and Fiction: Gower’s Comments on Eloquence and Courtly Poetry,” in *Gower’s Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Peter Nicholson [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991, 128). However, in constructing an idea of womanhood that is performative rather than innate, Gower exploits ambiguity in language to reflect ambiguity in nature. On this issue, ambiguity is productive as well as dangerous.

6. In the *Confessio*, wommanhiede variously signifies virtue, an association with maidenhead, a contrast to manhood (manly courage contrasted with womanly dread, for example), a tempting quality of sinfulness, and, most broadly, possession of a feminine nature. An important pattern of usage develops, however, as Gower employs womanhood as a focus for his ideas about the multiple manifestations of human nature.

7. Watt contends that the *Confessio Amantis* “deliberately encourages its audience to take risks in interpretation, to experiment with meaning, and to offer individualist readings. Indeed, insofar as it does not always give satisfactory answers to the moral questions it raises, and at times obfuscates rather than clarifies, it can be seen to pursue a negative critique of ethical poetry” (*Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003], xii). In a larger sense, this is certainly true, but in the specific case of his treatment of female victims, I believe that Gower takes an important—and unusual—approach toward their suffering as an index of immoral behavior. My interpretation comes closer to Elizabeth Allen’s view that Gower’s “moral poetry does not simply strive to legislate or ‘correcte’ human behavior, but seeks to engage his readers in the experience of conscious and deliberate moral choice” (“Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading,” *ELH* 64.3 (Fall 1997), 627–28).
8. There are eleven appearances in the frame versus thirteen in the tales. A large number of the tales discussed in this chapter, however, come from Book V of the Confessio; the adaptation of financial sins to love relationships creates interesting disjunctions that hint at the “value” of womanhood and its significance to both romance and the concept of manhood.


11. Wife of Bath’s Tale, 1043–44.

12. This may be because Chaucer envisions the word as having a definition beyond the Wife of Bath’s own ideas or experiences or because he does not want her to be one of the speakers who contribute to defining the term. Her ideas about what it means to be a woman certainly contrast with the characteristics and virtues Chaucer associates with womanhood elsewhere in the Canterbury Tales.

13. Wife of Bath’s Tale, 998, 1000, and 1005. The word “wyf” is being used in the general sense of “goodwife,” meaning “woman” rather than designating marital status.

14. Interestingly, the knight himself is originally described as “wifles”—this descriptor occurs even before his name is given (I, 1411).

15. Genius applies it to the Sirens, for example (I, 495).

16. Although it is difficult to ascertain how a pun like this would have worked in a primarily oral literary culture, it certainly exists in the written text and might have been conveyed through pronunciation or enjoyed by readers or the writer himself.

17. In Chaucer’s version of the story, it is at this moment that the loathly lady appeals to the queen to enforce the knight’s promise and announces her wish that he marry her. In the Confessio Amantis, Florent leaves the court to return to the woman, already knowing that he must marry her.

18. Wife of Bath’s Tale, 999–1000.

19. Gower also compares her to a Moor (I, 1686), another method of dehumanizing her and emphasizing that she inhabits the border between human and creature.

20. In his edition of the Confessio Amantis, Russell Peck glosses this line as a pun. At this point, however, the “best woman” reading seems less viable—there has been no evidence either of the knight’s feelings or of the woman’s nature that would justify that interpretation as anything more than a distinctly secondary alternative. The pun is stronger in its earlier appearance (which Peck does not note). John Gower, Confessio Amantis, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 67n.


22. In making the jump to the fifth book, I pass over ten intervening occurrences of womanhood (including some that will be explored later in this chapter), but I trace a trajectory of usage that has its own coherence.

23. Here I disagree with Karma Lochrie, who claims that Genius “trivializes rape and the woman’s suffering in particular” (Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999], 218). His representation of suffering is crucial to the text, although Amans fails to read and react to it.

24. The shape of the narrative as the Tale of Tereus rather than the Tale of Philomena reveals Gower’s focus on male behavior rather than female characters in this and other stories. By con-
trast, it is The Legend of Philomela in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*.

25. Chaucer’s version of the story in the *Legend of Good Women* includes quite similar animal imagery in describing the rape—an event that was perhaps more comfortably and more effectively described by way of a predator–prey simile—but only at this moment rather than throughout the story as in Gower’s version.

26. Carolyn Dinshaw argues that “making the rape seem unusual, the result of a single, even inhuman, desire” protects the patriarchal system from analysis and “keeps us from seeing other victimizations of women” (“Quarrels, Rivals, and Rape: Gower and Chaucer,” in *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, ed. Juliette Dor [Liège, Belgium: University of Liège Press, 1992], 119 and 118). While I agree that Tereus’s beastliness protects manhood from critique, I believe it also heightens readers’ sense of the women’s victimization.

27. As in the *Manciple’s Tale*, there is a pun here on bird/bride.

28. Dinshaw, “Quarrels, Rivals, and Rape,” 119 and 120.


30. The revenge also points up Tereus’s unkind and unnatural behavior by forcing him to do something against “kinde” (V, 5905).

31. Pity was also the crucial characteristic by which Hippolyta validated her womanhood in the *Knight’s Tale*, as discussed in the previous chapter.

32. Interestingly, Genius’s description of the vice includes not only rape (deluding and having sex with a woman as if she were a shepherdess, “For other mennes good is sweete” [V, 6118]) but also concealing the rape from one’s unsuspecting wife. The husband or father is often figured as the victim of this crime; rape takes something away from the man who “owns” the woman by diminishing her “value.” Gower’s perspective on rape as robbery is unusually woman-centered, first in identifying the raped woman as a true victim of the crime, but, more remarkably, by considering the wife of the rapist rather than the husband or father of the raped woman.

33. See also Nicola F. McDonald, “Avarice and the Economics of the Erotic in Gower,” in *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. Elizabeth M. Tyler (York, UK: York Medieval Press, 2000), especially pp. 152–53. This article contains an interesting discussion of Book V to which much of my thinking is indebted, although McDonald focuses on the disjunction Book V creates between “Christian and erotic codes of conduct” (152).

34. Genius clearly declares Cornix as the winner, saying, “The faire Maide him hath ascaped, / Wherof for evere he was bejaped” (V, 6215–16).


36. Genius then tells the tale of the Chastity of Valentinian, which is a more conventional treatment of male chastity. Although it is difficult to be certain, Gower’s use of “maidehiede” rather than “maidenhiede” or “maydenhede,” which consistently appear elsewhere in the text, may represent a lexical distinction between masculine and feminine states of virginity.

37. Watt considers some of these same tales in her examination of “transgressive genders” such as effeminacy and female masculinity, but she does not go so far as to suggest that these identities show the basic categories of manhood and womanhood as performative rather than innate, nor does she consider their overlap with beastliness (*Amoral Gower*, ch. 6).

38. Achilles does so by practicing “Honour, servise, and reverence” and adopting a “sobre and goodli contenance” (V, 3001 and 3005).

39. For *hert*, see earlier in this same tale (IV, 1978 and 1991) as well as I, 371 and 2299; V, 7401; and VIII, 2160. For *herte*, see Prologue 111, 155, and 184 and examples throughout the remainder of the text.

41. Here Gower, like Butler, challenges the idea that “certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original” and seeks “to open up the field of possibility for gender” (*Gender Trouble*, vii–viii).

42. Lochrie believes that even after they have had sex, “Achilles is still identified with his cross-dressed womanliness” and “there is no suggestion by Genius that the sexual act changes Achilles’s identity” (*Covert Operations*, 216–17). Although Achilles still demonstrates womanhood by day, I would argue that this passage suggests a change in his identity at some level—and perhaps recalls the similar proposed conditions of the loathly lady’s transformation in the Tale of Florent.

43. Deidamia’s son by Achilles is mentioned but is born outside the bounds of this tale. In addition to the interesting ambiguities it raises, this incident may reassure the reader that Achilles’s womanliness is a social performance and that his sexual performance, by contrast, is indisputably masculine. He may be acting like a woman but, as this scene demonstrates, he is not becoming one.

44. If we read this tale as one in which Achilles’s manly nature cannot be suppressed, then that nature is tied to war—he chooses the battle gear and this choice leads to his involvement in the Trojan War. Given Genius’s negative comments on war and violence elsewhere in the *Confessio Amantis*, this vision of manly nature appears problematic.

45. Elizabeth Allen suggests that Gower manipulates the representation of incest in Book VIII to encourage readers to construct their own moral code rather than simply identifying with and imitating moral characters or behavior; here, same-sex desire may work similarly. Allen, “Newfangled Readers in Gower’s ‘Apollonius of Tyre,’” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 419–64.

46. Diane Watt argues that Iphis is an example of how Genius “does not exclude women from masculinity, but rather allows the masculine woman to exist as a positive exemplary model and distinct gender category” (“Gender and Sexuality in *Confessio Amantis*,” in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sian Echard [Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2004], 207). In this case, however, that category is collapsed back into traditional ones.


48. Amans refers to the unnamed lady in this way in III, 541.


51. Kurt Olsson argues that Amans, responding to the tales of Iphis and Araxarathen and Pygmalion, “refashions his lady accordingly, fitting her variously to the types of gentle woman presented in these two tales” (“Aspects of Gentilese in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Books III–V,” in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R. F. Yeager [Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989], 260). In my reading, Amans responds to these stories by recognizing the possibility of blaming the lady for her behavior; he does not change this view of her, only the way in which he is willing to express it.
52. Crane, Gender and Romance, 65.

53. Jenny Rebecca Rytting, for example, identifies the Confessio as a marriage manual but does not explore the implications of this for Amans or his lady. Rytting, “In Search of the Perfect Spouse: John Gower’s Confessio Amantis as a Marriage Manual,” Dalhousie Review 82.1 (2002): 113–26.


56. The Tale of Rosiphelee is frequently mentioned in the criticism for its beauty of expression but, to my knowledge, no one has remarked on its unusual nature as a female example. For discussions of this tale, see: J. A. W. Bennett, “Gower’s ‘Honeste Love,’” in Gower’s Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology; María Bullón-Fernández, Fathers and Daughters in Gower’s Confessio Amantis: Authority, Family, State, and Writing (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), ch. 5; and Arno Esch, “John Gower’s Narrative Art,” trans. Linda Barney Burke, in Gower’s Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology, especially pp. 83–90.

57. James T. Bratcher suggests that Gower revises his sources to include a pun on brydel that “deepens the pathos of the lady’s fate, the price of her having tarried too long before seeking marriage.” If this is the case, then it resembles Gower’s use of the beste pun in the Tale of Florent. Bratcher, “The Function of the Jeweled Bridle in Gower’s ‘Tale of Rosiphelee,’” Chaucer Review 40.1 (2005), 110.

58. Conor McCarthy argues that Gower “offers marriage primarily as a remedy for lust, as something that can make love honeste, rather than as something good in itself”; in my view, these tales suggest that marriage is a virtuous responsibility (“Love and Marriage in the Confessio Amantis,” Neophilologus 84 [2000], 495).


60. One exception is McDonald, who notes in regard to a later passage, “Amans’s deep-seated desire to hold the lady fast, to wield her according to his own will, is one of the more unpleasant, even disturbing aspects of the lover’s character. It is also one aspect of his myopic pursuit that is explicitly condemned by Genius as sinful, avaricious behavior” (“Economics of the Erotic,” 151).


62. These accusations differ significantly from Amans’s earlier suggestion that the lady might be guilty of homicide, which was couched in terms of potentiality rather than actuality and hewed closer to romantic rhetoric. His accusations in Book V are direct and disturbing, distant from romantic convention.

63. In the tale of King, Wine, Woman and Truth in Book VII, the argument that woman is strongest runs thus: “The king and the vinour also / Of wommen comen bothe tuo; / And . . . manhede / Thurgh strengthe unto the wommanhede / Of love, wher he wole or non, / Obeie schal” (VII, 1875–80). Here again, the ambiguity of the language suggests both that men are subject to women in love and that a man’s manhood becomes like womanhood in the process.

64. Genius will explain in Book VIII that men who do not obey the laws of marriage are like
beasts (VIII, 159–63). Although most of the book will be devoted to the specific issue of incest, this comment is part of the more general introduction to the book.

65. In the Romance of the Rose, Reason urges the lover to rule his heart rather than letting it rule him, but Reason is overthrown. Venus's intervention contains the same message but is more successful: reason is restored and both the text and Amans are lifted out of romance.

66. Peck points out in the introduction to his abridged edition of the text that the question recalls Boethius's *Consolation* and that this is the proper answer (“Introduction,” *Confessio Amantis*, xiii).

67. Alceste was also a paragon of womanhood in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*.

Chapter Three

1. I have come across the term in Hoccleve's “Balade to the Duke of York” (1. 30) and in the final envoy to Lady Westmoreland in the Durham ms. of the *Series*. It also occurs in the *Kingis Quair* (l. 814).


4. This epithet is the knight's description of the lady (John Lydgate, *Temple of Glas*, ed. J. Schick, EETS Extra Series 60 [1891; London: Oxford University Press, 1924], 1. 766). All subsequent references to this text will be parenthetical by line number.


7. Two exceptions are J. Allan Mitchell, “Queen Katherine and the Secret of Lydgate’s *Temple of Glas*,” *Medium Aevum* 77.1 (2008), 64–66; and Larry Scanlon, “Lydgate’s Poetics: Laureation and Domesticity in the *Temple of Glass*,” in *John Lydgate*, ed. Scanlon and Simpson, 87. Mitchell argues that the poem alludes to the clandestine marriage of Henry V’s widow, Katherine of Valois, and so the unnamed restriction is her delicate political position; Scanlon points out that the constraint is unspecified.


10. The modern adoption of this assumption dates from Pearsall; previous critics were not as uniform in reading the lady as married. Alan Renoir, for example, believed that the lady was complaining against the conventions of courtly love, which would not allow her to demonstrate
her feelings. Arguing that Lydgate held a kind of protohumanist attitude toward women, Renoir claims that in the *Temple of Glas*, Lydgate “shows us the woman suffering . . . because she is an individual human being who bruises herself against a convention which expects her to pretend aloofness before her lover, while every emotional impulse in her urges immediate submission to the flesh” (Renoir, *The Poetry of John Lydgate* [London: Routledge, 1967], 93).


12. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 107. This group of stanzas is present only in one group of manuscripts. See *Temple of Glas*, p. 14. Pearsall believes this version to be an earlier one but, in his “Introduction,” Schick identifies this interpolation as a corruption rather than an original section of the poem (xl) because these stanzas seem inconsistent with the lady’s voice (1). These variations suggest that this passage, which describes the subject of the lady’s complaint, is a problematic section for scribes/readers.

13. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 108. Even if we accept this as an earlier version, it does not directly mention a husband; however, the hint of marriage is stronger.

14. There are seven instances of *womanhed* (266, 288, 766, 931, 975, 1117, and 1386) and four of *womanhede* (746, 875, 1065, and 1207).

15. The dreamer describes the lady’s . . . gret semelines,
   Hir womanhed, hir port, & hir fairnes,
   It was a meruaile, hou euer þat nature
   Coude in hir werkis make a creature
   So aungellike, so goodli on to se,
   So femynyn or passing of beaute. (265–70)

The dreamer describes the knight similarly:

   Me þouȝt he was, to speke of semelynes,
   Of shappe, of fourme, & also of stature,
   The most passing þat euir ȝit nature
   Made in hir werkis, & like to ben a man;
   And þerwith-al, as I reherse can,
   Of face and chere þe most gracious. (556–61)

The resemblances are apparent, but the first passage is only a small part of the representation of the lady while the second passage is the majority of the knight’s.

16. This may be a sign of Gower’s influence, although the *Confessio* does not present Venus as an overt model of womanhood.

17. See also Crockett, “Venus Unveiled,” 77–81, for an ironic reading of the religious symbolism.


   [T]he *Temple of Glass* initially refers to Venus, quite sketchily, as the anadyomene: “she sate fleting in the se” (53). The lovers in the poem describe her as a planet, a star of comforting light. The narrator eventually depicts Venus as a unified carnal and
spiritual force, a planetary goddess holding tightly to the fiery chain of eternal love. None of these descriptions gains a mythographic commentary, and each complicates the deity’s import. The Venuses of *Troybook, Reason and Sensuality*, and *Temple of Glass* exemplify once again the range of refigurations and reinterpretations possible even for one writer. . . . Lydgate continually describes and deciphers the deities anew, combining and revising traditions to suit his immediate purposes. (132)

19. Nor is a husband or marriage directly invoked when the two lovers are joined at the close of the vision.


21. As Torti points out, by focusing on the lady’s perspective, Lydgate creates a new vision of love, “not to be looked at only from the point of view of the man imploring a woman made of ice, but from the woman’s point of view as well” (Torti, “Atwixen Twp,” 229).

22. The knight begins his complaint, “Alas! what þing mai þis be, / That nou am bound, þat whilom was so fre, / And went at laarge, at myn eleccioun: / Nou am I cauȝt vnder subieccioun” (567–70).

23. This is my primary point of disagreement with Scanlon, who argues that Lydgate empowers the lady by prioritizing her desire (“Lydgate’s Poetics,” 86 and 91).

24. It is uncertain here whether womanhood would constrain any woman’s response in this situation or whether it is the lady’s class position (as a “quene of womanhed”) or even her earlier exchange with Venus that binds the lady specifically.

25. In fact, part of the lady’s response to the knight is physical: her “femyny[ni]te” is revealed in her face (1045). The knight’s plea literally brings forth her femininity. This suggests that the lady may be responding according to social convention—ideals of femininity—rather than personal desire.

26. Accepting the adultery reading of the poem, Tinkle interprets this final scene differently: “Venus’s chain binding these lovers together contrasts with another chain binding the woman, an image of her present unavailability. The two chains picture an opposition between natural desire and legal duty, between natural and human law. Venus takes the side of natural desire, and nature here accords with eternal love” (*Medieval Venuses*, 154).

27. This interpretation brings us back to the Petrarchan take on Griselda. We might view women as traditional/archetypal subjects and hence read their situations as that of any subject—i.e., constrained by subjecthood rather than specifically womanhood. However, because the poem is so focused on the lady and on womanhood, and on the differences between the constraints experienced by the lady and those experienced by the knight, I read the *Temple of Glass* as focusing on the more specific issue of womanhood.


32. *Troilus and Criseyde* in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mif-
33. Fox notes that Henryson’s use of the word may recall Chaucer’s use of the word to describe Criseyde, but he does not explore the significance of this connection (Henryson, *Poems*, p. 346 n88). C. David Benson notes another usage by Henryson that expands on rather than critiques Chaucer’s meaning: the term “parliament” (Benson, “Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and Henryson Did to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*,” in *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Daniel J. Pinti [New York: Garland, 1998], 236).


36. Derek Pearsall provides a typical formulation: Henryson is “determined that Chaucer’s heroine should be brought to the bar of judgment. He plucks her out of the kindly oblivion in which Chaucer had left her, makes a spiteful insinuation about her subsequent career, loads her with infamy, punishes her, and then, as if under challenge to prove that humanity is never irredeemable, redeems her” (Pearsall, “‘Quha Wait Gif all That Chaucer Wrait Was Trew?’: Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*,” in *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R. A. Waldron*, ed. Susan Powell and Jeremy J. Smith [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000], 173). Felicity Riddy argues that “Henryson’s version of the harlot’s ruin is not simply antifeminist but is used to shore up one kind of femininity against another: the ‘worthie women’ of the final stanza against the ‘giglot’” (“‘abject Odious’: Feminine and Masculine in Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid,*” in *The Long Fifteenth Century*, ed. Helen Cooper, Sally Mapstone, and Joerg O. Fichte [Oxford: Clarendon, 1997], 242). Lee Patterson sees Cresseid as “sluttish” (“Christian and Pagan in The Testament of Cresseid,” *Philological Quarterly* 52 [1973]: 698) while R. James Goldstein describes Henryson as “misogynistic” (“Writing in Scotland, 1058–1560,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 241). At best, Henryson’s narrator is echoing Chaucer’s. After various comments on this subject (see pp. 163, 169–70, and 174, for example), Gray concludes his study of the poem by stating that “Pite, that great expression of love, is continually present—in the comments of the narrator, in the kindness shown to her by the human characters in the story . . . [L]ove and human affection assert themselves” (Robert Henryson, 207–8). Fox argues that Henryson “understood and imitated Chaucer’s narrator” in his vacillation from condemnation to sympathy and that Henryson’s narrator is “impassioned by sympathy for the wronged Cresseid” (“Introduction” in Henryson, *Poems*, xciii and 346 n89–91).


38. See, for example, MacQueen “Poetry—James I to Henryson,” 70; Patterson, “Christian and Pagan,” especially pp. 698, 700, and 704; and Edwin D. Craun, “Blaspheming Her ‘Awin God’: Cresseid’s ‘Lamentatioun’ in Henryson’s *Testament,*” *Studies in Philology* 82.1 (1985), especially p. 27.

39. Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature*
40. Benson argues that “Lydgate approached Chaucer’s story of Troilus and Criseyde as a scholarly commentator ready to annotate, reinforce, and provide his readers with the historical context to Chaucer’s work; Henryson’s response is to exploit in his own original way Chaucer’s innovative literary devices, including the characterization of Criseyde. It is as if each were attempting to rectify a different absence in Troilus” (“Critic and Poet,” 228). I agree with the broad outline of Benson’s argument, but whereas Benson sees Henryson as straightforwardly giving Cresseid’s side of the story, I see him using the depiction of Cresseid to critique Chaucer. Benson argues, “Henryson’s Cresseid not only transcends Lydgate’s antifeminist cliché but also becomes in some ways more interesting and certainly braver than Chaucer’s heroine” (“Critic and Poet,” 239).

41. At one point, Troilus even comments on the difficulty of interpreting Criseyde’s beautiful face: “Though ther be mercy writen in youre cheere, / God woot, the text ful hard is, soth, to fyndel!” (III, 1356–57).

42. III, 4436–38 and 4441–43.

43. It is the second, non-Chaucerian account of “the fatall destenie / Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie,” which the narrator picks up after Chaucer’s “quair,” that prompts the narrator to ponder the veracity of Chaucer’s version (62–63).

44. Pearsall claims this lament is “famously queasy” and the narrator’s “professed sympathy is deeply suspect” (“Quha Wait Gif,” 174). Gray suggests that in this passage Henryson is “echoing Chaucer’s words on Criseyde (V, 1093–99),” which were referred to above (Robert Henryson, 173). Rather than echoing Chaucer’s words, however, Henryson is illustrating where and how they fell short.

45. Gray, Robert Henryson, 170. Henryson connected the epithet with Chaucer’s version of Criseyde when he named “fair Creisseid and worthie Troylus” (42) as the subjects of Chaucer’s “quair” (40).

46. Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate also used this specific phrase, so it has been connected to the idea of womanhood from its inception. See, for example, Chaucer’s “Womanly Noblesse” (28); Gower’s Confessio Amantis (V, 6182); and Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady (I, 182; and V, 385) and Temple of Glas (1207).

47. Riddy, “Abiect Odious,” 246. It is not entirely clear whether Cresseid exchanged her femininity for filth or whether she changed it with filth, but the context favors the latter interpretation.

48. This phrasing recalls the more positive translation of Griselda in the Clerk’s Tale.

49. This sets up a situation parallel to that of Chaucer’s narrator, who hid behind his sources to excuse his inability to explain what happened to Criseyde more fully. Because her blasphemy is the immediate cause of her punishment, it is true that if she hadn’t blasphemed then she might not have been punished by the gods. But Henryson’s narrator has encouraged readers to see Criseyde’s treatment as so unfair that she can hardly help crying out against it.

50. Boffey claims that “The projection of her disfigured self as a ‘mirror’ to warn others of the physical decay that awaits them is also here perhaps not entirely altruistic; Cresseid seems partly to seek consolation in anticipating the fragility of others’ beauty” (“Literary Testament,” 55).

51. See Patterson, “Christian and Pagan,” for example.

52. See Fox, “Introduction,” in Henryson, Poems, xciii; and Patterson, “Christian and Pagan,” 705. The form does vary slightly (in the antistrophe, for example), but this is the dominant stanza type.
53. The text ends just after Anelida concludes her complaint and it may be that Chaucer has written himself into a situation from which it is difficult to imagine what the next step would be. What might a woman like Anelida do after making this complaint, having rejected the traditional alternatives of pleading with her lover or telling her story to others?

54. Lesley Johnson argues that Cresseid’s “leprosy, which literally produces the conditions of old age, gives Cresseid the privileged position of ‘advanced time’ from which, detached from, yet still inside the worldly frame, she may undercut the heroic sweep of epic history with more mundane insights into worldly mutability” (“Whatever Happened to Criseyde? Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid,” in Courtly Literature: Culture and Context, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990), 314. We might read Cresseid’s death as a kind of ultimate extension of this position.

55. The epitaph is usually read as significant primarily because it effectively shuts the door on Cresseid’s life and story. See, for example, Boffey, “Literary Testament,” 53 (“[Troilus’s epitaph] stresses at once Cresseid’s physical degeneration and the possibility that her story, given visible form in the written letters, may have some kind of salutary afterlife in the minds of its readers.”); Craun, “Blaspheming,” 39 (“[The epitaph] records not her infidelity in love but the bare facts of her physical degradation and death.”); and Johnson, “Whatever Happened,” 317 (“Cresseid’s epitaph . . . provides no further clue to what should be made of Cresseid’s history other than restating her story in its most abbreviated form”).

56. Womanhood is also used by other Scottish writers of the same period; for instance, it appears in the Kingis Quair (814), Hary’s Wallace (V, 691), and several of Dunbar’s works (The Twa Marit Wemen and the Wedo, 77 and 315; “[In Prays of Woman],” 11; and “[To a Ladye] Quhone He List to Feyne,” 9 and 39).

57. The Tragedy of Troilus and Cressida (V.ii.152).

Chapter Four


6. Nicholas Watson makes a similar point, though more broadly, in “The Middle English


9. This language also found its way into the Church as an institution; Jeremy Catto notes, “In the new occasional offices [in the fifteenth century] of the Five Wounds, the Crown of Thorns (*Corona Domini*), or the Compassion of the Virgin, meditations on the Passion of Christ were given liturgical expression, drawing on the same fund of religious feeling and sometimes on the same language as the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich” (“Religious Change under Henry V,” in *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*, ed. G. L. Harriss [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985], 109).


11. Baker, *From Vision to Book*, 164. There have been studies that treated the language of the text in order to draw conclusions about how and where different manuscripts originated (see, e.g., Riddy “Self-Textualization”), but Julian’s methods of expression and articulation are more recently coming to the forefront in work by critics such as Watson and Jenkins in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* and Jennifer Bryan in *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), ch. 4. In their edition of *A Book of Showings*, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh do provide a brief appendix listing rhetorical figures employed by Julian (*Julian of Norwich, A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Colledge and Walsh, 2 vols., Studies and Texts 35 [Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978], 735–48). Robert Stone’s *Middle English Prose Style: Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970) compares the styles of Julian and Margery, but is dated in its attitude toward the latter.

12. Julian’s ideas have also been privileged over her language in popular reception (literary as well as religious); for considerations of this largely postmedieval history, see Sarah Salih and

13. These and all future parenthetical references are to the Watson and Jenkins edition.

14. R. N. Swanson comments on this problem: “The ‘mystical’ writers, such as Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich, grappled with the problem of expressing a tradition of Latin spirituality in English, and had to stretch the language considerably (although in less mystical treatises the writers worked largely within the extant vocabulary)” (Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989], 263).


17. “Fulhede,” *Middle English Dictionary* (Middle English Compendium), <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med>. All subsequent references to the MED will be to this version unless otherwise noted.

18. By contrast, Margery Kempe uses only a few -hed(e) words, and those seem to be established terms rather than of her own coining. Generally speaking, the language of Margery’s *Book* is less inventive and varied than Julian’s. Margery uses Godheed and manhood most often; childhood several times; and maydenhed, wedyebrode, and presthooide twice each. As an interesting aside, none of the terms appears prior to the seventeenth chapter, the one that precedes the chapter in which Margery describes her visit with Julian. The terms do not appear in clusters, as they do in the Shewings, but Godheed often appears with references to the manhood or childhod of Christ. Most of Margery’s -hed(e) words are religious by denotation or connotation.


20. The Sloane manuscript was the basis for two modern critical editions of the long text: Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Crampton, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993); and *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (1976; Exeter, UK: University of Exeter, 1989). In the newest edition, Watson and Jenkins combine features from multiple manuscripts but argue convincingly for the linguistic accuracy of Sloane: “There is thus much to be said for following many of Sloane’s word choices, which tend to be more consistent than Paris’s, are generally northeastern in character, and are often supported by Additional, sometimes by Westminster, and sometimes by irregular forms in Paris. . . . In matters of diction, the analysis clearly favors S’s readings over those of P” (“Introduction,” 37). Colledge and Walsh’s earlier critical edition, however, used the Paris manuscript. The linguistic patterns I note here are also present in Paris, although somewhat less pronounced. Colledge and Walsh even note that “throughout, Julian shows marked preference for abstract nouns in ‘-head’” (*A Book of Showings*, 309n). The primary difference between the two versions is that in the Paris manuscript some of the -head words have the -ness suffix instead (particularly the more unusual and isolated words, such as “irkehede” and “bolnehed”); this difference may be dialectical or a modernization imposed by the Paris scribe. The patterns I note here apply generally to both manuscripts.

21. See, for example, “plentuoushede” (147) versus “plentuous” (149) or “irkehede” (123) versus “irkenes” (175). Some of this may be attributable to scribes, but the substantial number of appearances of -hed(e) forms at the moments I note later and the appearances of other forms at other moments suggest that the choice of forms has significance beyond being a purely personal or regional pattern of usage.

22. There are a number of common terms with the -hede ending, including fatherhood, man-
hood, widowhood, and maidenhood, but it is less common to create adjectives or abstract nouns by pinning the -hede suffix onto a word rather than, for example, -ness.


25. In what seems to be an earlier usage, Gower employs the term in his Confessio Amantis. Chaucer does not use it.


27. Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 168.


30. We might also see Julian’s revisions as maternal—she nurtures and shapes the text.


32. The long text appears to have been written about twenty years after the short text, although Watson has argued for a reversal of this chronology in “Composition.”

33. For the scribal headings, see Julian of Norwich, Shewings, ed. Crampton, 49. On male and female anchorites, see Crampton, “Introduction,” in Julian of Norwich, Shewings, ed. Crampton, 7.


36. Both Julian and Margery also invoked Mary Magdalene (and leveraged her connection to the corporeal) to develop their spiritual authority, as Theresa Coletti has shown in Mary Magdalene, 77–84.

37. Because the visit seems to have taken place in 1412 or 1413, it is unlikely that Margery influenced Julian’s thinking in or writing of her Shewings, even if we accept Watson’s later date of composition for the long text.


40. Caroline Walker Bynum negotiates this problem more carefully than most, admitting that Margery “takes such [sexual and maternal] images to heights of literalism” but rejecting the view that her “cuddling with Christ in bed is simply a case of an uneducated woman taking literally metaphors from the Song of Songs” (Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion [New York: Zone Books, 1991], 41 and 44). For Bynum, however, these images from affective piety reveal Margery’s conventional interest in the humanity of Christ; they are not original or strategic because “Margery, for all her fervor, her courage, her piety, her mystical gifts and her brilliant imagination, cannot write her own script” (41).


44. Virginia Burrus, The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1. Burrus does suggest that this eroticism was the product of particular historical circumstances, perhaps explaining why Margery’s case is uncommon among medieval devotional writers: “The ascetics of late antiquity cultivated purposeful disciplines of embodiment and textuality, pedagogy and prayer, which freed desire from the constraining and often violently oppressive structures of familial, civic, and imperial domination” (161). It is also worth noting that none of Burrus’s texts was the product of women; perhaps it was easier for men to use this kind of concrete sexual imagery.


49. This tradition dates back to at least the twelfth century; see, for example, Luigi Gambiero, Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 169, 178–79, and 186–88; and, for a popular study, Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), ch. 8.


52. For an exception, see Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: Boydell Press, 2004), ch. 1. She notes the importance of motherhood in the Book but does not examine how Margery uses her own physical motherhood to create authority for herself nor how she mixes maternal with sexual imagery (although McAvoy separately discusses images of prostitution in the text).


60. Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 89.


62. Bynum suggests that the dangers of marriage and motherhood were serious enough to explain some women’s desire for chastity and continence (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 226). Dyan Elliott terms the impulse toward chastity “a revolt against the reproductive imperative” (*Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 5).

63. See “privete (n.)” in the MED.

64. Such figurative interpretations are also orthodox. See Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 89 n5.

65. This interpretation is reinforced by Christ’s comment earlier in the text that it is “no synne” for Margery to continue to have sex with her husband because “I wyl that thow bryng me forth mor frwte” (59).
66. Margery’s suggestion that both physical and spiritual offspring are desirable and that the latter is somehow dependent on the former departs from typical representations. *Hali Meidhad*, for instance, sharply contrasts the experience of physically bearing children (which involves “sore sorhfule angoise”) with producing spiritual offspring (which is restricted to a virgin, who “ne swinke[eth] ne ne pineo[eth]”) (Bella Millett, ed., *Hali Meidhad*, EETS 284 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982], 18 and 20).

67. Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 123. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale* provides one example of a mother in this role and also draws comparisons with Mary; see Bruce Holmesinger, “Pedagogy, Violence, and the Subject of Music: Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale* and the Ideologies of ‘Song,’” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 157–92.

68. While Julian of Norwich is also interested in both motherhood and Mary, and also uses these concerns as authorizing strategies, critics have most heavily emphasized the former in her text. See, for example, Ritamary Bradley, “The Motherhood Theme in Julian of Norwich,” *Fourteenth-Century English Mystics Newsletter* 2.4 (1976): 25–30; McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, ch. 2; and Maud Burnett McInerney, “In the Meydens Womb: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure,” and Andrew Sprung, “The Inverted Metaphor: Earthly Mothering as Figura of Divine Love in Julian of Norwich’s *Book of Showings*,” both in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996). For more general discussion of how both male and female mystics made use of maternal imagery, see Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, ch. 4.

69. Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 269. Gambero notes, however, that the human aspects of Mary were becoming more emphasized at the end of the Middle Ages; he suggests that the faithful imagined Mary “as a Mother, smiling as her Holy Child embraces her” and, during the Passion, as “a Mother who cannot bear the overwhelming sorrow that has befallen her” (*Mary in the Middle Ages*, 255–56).


71. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Vol. III, Part 1: Text, trans. with commentary by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Canto XXXIII; and Geoffrey Chaucer, “An ABC” and *Canterbury Tales*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), hereafter referred to parenthetically by line number. Jaroslav Pelikan notes that these two aspects of Mary—as *Mediatrix* and as *Mater Dolorosa*—were the most important contributions of the later Middle Ages to Christian teachings about Mary; he observes “a close correlation between the subjectivity of the devotion to Mary as the Mater Dolorosa and the objectivity of the doctrine of Mary as the Mediatrix” (*Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996], 125–26 and 136).

72. For more on the varied paradoxes mobilized in portrayals of the Virgin Mary in medieval literature, see Teresa P. Reed, *Shadows of Mary: Reading the Virgin Mary in Medieval Texts*


78. Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 89. Other female spiritual figures, such as Marie d’Oignies, were also associated with excessive weeping, but their tears and suffering are not connected with Mary’s. For Marie’s case, see Jennifer N. Brown, *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis, and Marie d’Oignies* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 93–95.


81. Alternatively, Jeffrey Cohen suggests that Margery’s cries represent “vocalizations [that] might be understood as a bodily response to the inadequacies of language, communicating on her behalf what words might or could not” (*Medieval Identity Machines*, Medieval Cultures, vol. 35 [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003], 162).

82. Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*. 81. Beckwith does also suggest that this embodied strategy ultimately provides a way to move past the body: “By approximating herself to Christ, misrecognising herself in him, by living a life which is itself a mimesis and remembrance of the Passion, the female mystic may gain access to the Word” (“A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe,” in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986], 54).


85. Bridget of Sweden has a similar episode with one of her sons, Charles, but it is narrated by the Virgin Mary as she tells how she attended his judgment after death; there is no direct discussion of Bridget’s concern for Charles beforehand or of how her community perceived this (although, according to Mary, a devil does colorfully decry Bridget as a “cursed sow . . . who had a belly so expansive that so much water poured into her that her belly’s every space was filled with liquid for tears!”) (*Birgitta of Sweden*, 187).

86. The vow of chastity Margery takes is an important part of this process, as are her various mentions of how she is revolted by the prospect of sex with her husband or other men. Her recurring fear of rape as she travels signals her desire to preserve the transition she has made while also indicating that this is not completely under her control.


88. Margery’s literalism might also be read in the context of the particular kind of spiritual life she develops, rejecting enclosure in favor of wandering the world. Beckwith points out that “Margery’s book is a devotional work which does not exclude the material context of its...
piety. Margery was a religious woman who refused the space traditionally allotted to religious women—the sanctuary (or imprisonment) provided by the anchoress’s cell or the nunnery. Her lack of circumspection, her insistence on living in the world, enables the social dimension which makes her mysticism distinctive” (“A Very Material Mysticism,” 37). See also Beckwith, Christ’s Body, ch. 4.

89. See note 40.
90. Elsewhere I have argued that Margery’s deployment of widowhood and wifehood represents a similar manipulation of female roles and similarly signals her active role in shaping the Book. Williams, “‘As Thu Wer a Wedow’: Margery Kempe’s Wifehood and Widowhood,” Exemplaria 21.4 (Winter 2009): 345–62.
96. This is a dominant theme in the Book and is also observed by others; one clerk affirms, “he had nevyr herd of non sweche in this worlde leyng for to be so homly wyth God be lofe and homly dalyawnce as sche was” (85).
97. These problematic characteristics of Margery and her text may be partly responsible for Sarah Rees Jones’s provocative contention that the text was a fiction “written by men, for men, and about men.” Jones argues for locating the text not in the tradition of female autobiography but instead “within the general tradition of clerical chastisement through the medium of holy women” (“‘A Peler of holy Church’: Margery Kempe and the Bishops,” in Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. [Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000], 391 and 382).
98. Aers, Community, Gender and Individual Identity, 106.
100. Beckwith, Christ’s Body, 84–85.
102. While references to mystics as mothers of Christ, and to God or Christ as mother, occurred elsewhere—most famously in Julian’s Shewings—Margery’s role as mother of God is unusual. On the distinction between God as mother and Christ as mother, see Ricki Jean Cohn, “God and Motherhood in The Book of Margery Kempe,” Studia Mystica 9.1 (1986): 26–35.
103. Bynum argues that gender and gendered characteristics are relatively fluid for medieval
104. Previous studies have paid little attention to this, but Staley does note that Margery slips from third to first person pronouns during her visit with her husband to the Bishop of Lincoln (Dissenting Fictions, 79).

105. When Margery negotiates with her husband over chastity, she is referred to as “hys wyfe” (37), but this is a more isolated example and she is the “creatur” for the rest of that chapter.

Conclusion


2. One exception to this trend is Femenie, which retains its narrow primary meaning as a name for the land of the Amazons.


6. Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions, ed. M. A. Manzalaoui, EETS 276 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 12–13. This usage of womanhood is unusual not only in relation to other occurrences of the term but also in relation to other Middle English translations of the Secretum Secretorum. See, for instance, the parallel sections in the “Ashmole” version (106–7) and the translations by Johannes de Caritate (200–1) and Robert Copland (380–81). In each case, small voices have negative connotations and are associated with lying, but they are neither characterized as feminine nor connected to womanhood.

7. The MED makes this distinction in its second set of definitions for “wommanhede,” which include “the qualities belonging to or characteristic of a woman, womanliness, femininity; also, effeminacy [quot. c1400].” The single quote offered as evidence of usage for “effeminacy” is this one from Secretum Secretorum. Middle English Dictionary (Middle English Compendium), <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med>.


10. This convention can be traced back to the fourteenth century, when Chaucer also employed it (and prefigured the more general usage of womanhood that it later entails) by naming a lady “Soveraigne of beautee, floure of wommanhede” in the envoy to “Womanly Noblesse” (*Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987], 28).


18. As Helen Maurer observes, Margaret’s “experience pushed the limits of the gender system that she and her contemporaries accepted and acknowledged” (*Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* [Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003], 4). Margaret was not the only woman in her family whose experiences pushed those limits, however; see p. 23. Nancy Bradley Warren has linked Margaret to Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc (both also often seen as problematically powerful) (*Women of God and Arms*, ch. 3).

19. Anthony Gross suggests that Margaret’s attempt to gain the regency may have been heavily influenced—even instigated—by her advisors (*The Dissolution of the Lancastrian Kingship: Sir John Fortescue and the Crisis of Monarchy in Fifteenth-Century England* [Stamford, UK: Paul Watkins, 1996], 51–57).

20. Her letter appears in the “Life of Sir John Fortescue,” put together by his nineteenth-century descendant, Lord Clermont, as the preface to *The Works of Sir John Fortescue, Knight, Chief Justice of England and Lord Chancellor to King Henry the Sixth*. The “Life” collects a number of letters to and from Fortescue, including one from December 1463 or 1464 that he wrote to the Earl of Ormond with directions for a trip to Portugal to seek assistance for Henry VI. This letter encloses a second missive with instructions to the earl from Queen Margaret (Thomas Fortescue Clermont, “Life of Sir John Fortescue,” in *The Works of Sir John Fortescue, Knight, Chief Justice of England and Lord Chancellor to King Henry the Sixth* [London: Printed for private distribution, 1869], 26).

21. A 1456 letter in the Paston collection from John Bocking to Sir John Fastolf famously describes Margaret as “a grete and strong laburid woman, for she spareth noo peyne to sue hire


24. *Ipomadon*, 1. 118.


26. The most significant recent treatment of Capgrave, Winstead’s *John Capgrave’s Fifteenth Century*, includes substantial analysis of the *Life* and its representations of intellectualism, sovereignty, and virginity.


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